

Graduate Research Seminar — Project Proposal

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we were all made of sand
(working title)

I. A personal archive: an introduction

The starting point of my graduation project will be the moving images my grandfather (my father's father) shot during the 1970's. A personal family archive I found while visiting my grandparents in Curacao.

My grandfather is from Suriname. He's a former ophthalmologist who, together with his family, has lived a life in movement: from Suriname, to St. Eustatius, to the Netherlands and finally to Curacao. During the 1970's my grandparents lived in the Netherlands, moved to Curacao and occasionally visited Suriname.

When I found these film rolls and obsessively started watching them, I began noticing the subtle shift between layers of observing, seeing/sight and watching.

My grandfather filmed his surroundings. This includes observations during family gatherings but also outside of his house(s) (filming plants, flowers, street-life, beaches, and people) he also filmed or let himself be filmed while performing eye-surgery. Another recurring phenomenon is my grandfather filming the television.

For the eye-assignment I decided I wanted to work with this rich material. I intuitively wrote a short text about a dream-like state of mind in which I thought time was going backwards and combined it with fragments my grandfather shot of restless ocean waves crashing into the rocky coastline of Curacao. (I'll unpack this a bit more in the 'relation to previous practice' section.)

After this, I wanted to continue researching his films and what they mean to me with the limited background knowledge I have about the footage. I started writing about what I saw, as objective as possible. (e.g.: *a young girl is standing behind a gate. She smiles at the camera.*)

Then, I started to project my background knowledge, adding names and my family relation to the people in the film (*Natascha, my aunt's youngest sister, is standing behind a gate. She smiles at the camera.*) While doing so it became more apparent about how little I know about the exact context of the films.

The more I looked at the films, the more details I would see. Questions would pop up in my head about these details. For example: there's a short clip of my grandmother, uncle and father standing by a gate in front of their first house in Curacao. Above the gate the words "Luctor et Emergo" are written in bold capital letters. Meaning: "I struggle and emerge."

I started wondering about the significance of it.

Since my grandfather is still alive, I thought it would be interesting to email him and question him about the footage he had shot. As a response to the example above, my grandfather wrote me a very long and detailed backstory about how and why this saying was imprinted above their gate. He also pointed out another detail about the gate, he wrote about a cactus that grew above it. This cactus would only bloom at night and thus was called 'lady of the night' (*dama di anochi*)

My grandfather wrote about its soft and lovely scent.

This correspondence led me to think about the possibility of working with two archives: the moving images as an archive and my grandfather as a living archive.



With this project I would like to take the opportunity, while my grandfather is still alive, of reconstituting his personal archive in a way that examines both our relationship with the moving images in his personal archive, how do we make sense of it / speak to it and how is memory intertwined with this? (Memory as a story, the story as a memory)

Experimenting with adding on to the moving image archive by having dialogues and then visually / textually re-imagining it through my own eyes.

'Applying' new insights, creating space for new stories to originate. Creating space for writing my own history.

A visual and textual research that could take the form of an experimental essay film about the sensibility of a personal archive.

I am interested in the experimental essay film because it gives me the freedom of not following linear structures and it foregrounds the process of thought and the labor of constructing a narrative rather than aiming for seamless artifacts that conceal the conceptual questions that went into their making. Incompletion, loose ends, directorial inadequacy: these are acknowledged in the essay film rather than brushed over.¹



3 film stills

*Observation of a hand
touching
a globe*



*My grandfather's
hands performing
surgery*



*Hands playing drums
on the TV*

¹ Sandhu, S. 'Vagrancy and drift: the rise of the roaming essay film,' *The Guardian* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/aug/03/rise-essay-film-bfi-season> (Accessed on 13 November 2020)

II. How?

Tearing it down

First I will start logging the footage in categories by what appears on them.

This will create an overview of the fragments I have, how they relate to each other and later how they could possibly be juxtaposed. Resulting in a lot of loose fragments that I can look at in detail that I'll then start to intuitively 'select': work with.

Building it up again: constructing a narrative

I'm going to keep a journal in which I'll write about my thought-process behind 'selecting' the fragments: How do I work with them? Why do I work with them? I think it's interesting to do this because there are a lot of questions I must ask myself when working with the footage: what do they have in common? Must they have anything in common? I imagine that my grandfather will also influence my selection process since he won't always have a specific memory, back story or a hidden detail behind the fragments I'll send him. I see it as a bit of a treasure hunt, one where I must also ask myself when and why a backstory is interesting to me or why it moves me. This journal will be incorporated in my thesis.

Constructing a narrative: experimenting with the footage while also corresponding with my grandfather. Questions I should ask myself in doing so: what language will I be using? (Dutch, English, Sranan Tongo?) For whom am I making this film? > For example: If I'm making this film for my grandfather, it doesn't make any sense to use sound because he's practically deaf. (His footage also doesn't have any sound, which I think is interesting.)

“Create your own categories from scribbled notes
conversations
noise
love
experience
feeling
REJECT standardised cohesion,
rationality,
definitions,
types
Delete chronology; ACTIVATE randomised
jumble ... tumble ... mix ... irregularity
threads CHAOS (is good)
Beautiful Anarchy
Inclusion
self-directed learning
user-led
DELETE”
(Digital Women's Archive North [DWAN] 2017, p.157)

III. Why?

Why I want to do this project is personally motivated.

It started with a fascination for my grandfather's footage because it holds a world in movement that I'm not a part of but that is a part of me.

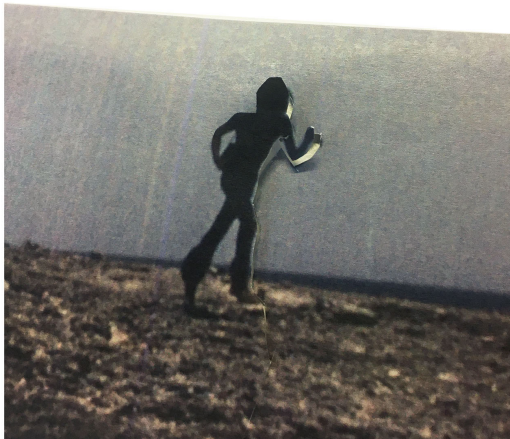
I'm trying to grasp a part of my identity that I feel distant to. I was born in Curacao, grew up in the Netherlands and have roots in Suriname: a country I've never been to.

This does not necessarily have anything to do with the outcome of the project.

I think the relation between why I'm doing this and the outcome will become clearer during the process. *Solvitur Ambulando*: it is solved by walking.



when moving myself
through
the archive



I'd like to think
it moves
through
me as well

Picture of cut out experiment, film still combined with text

IV. Relation to previous practice

During the eye-assignment I first started working with my grandfathers material. I approached it more intuitively. By using fragments he filmed of the sea and combining it with a piece of text I wrote about waking up while thinking time was going backwards. They were unconnected but somehow worked quite well together.

After this it seemed I couldn't reproduce it or continue with it in the same way because it was a happy accident. I wanted to continue working with the footage and develop methodologies in doing so.

My previous practice revolves around the distance between my family and me, often researching the role images play within this distance. I'll elaborate on this a bit more in the thesis outline.

V. Larger context

Within my thesis I will be exploring the larger context of this project. Discussing and researching the personal archive, historical context and how identity is connected to them. I'll elaborate on this as well in my thesis outline.

VI. Timetable

November

Logging the footage in categories by what appears on them

December

Selection process begins: keeping a journal

Collecting material (fragments) whilst:

Emailing back and forth with my grandfather (treasure hunt)

Start experimenting constructing a narrative

Start experimenting with sound / language (taking into consideration who the film is for)

January / February

Deadline for making choice about language and sound

Treasure hunt continues

Experimenting too

(In case I want to work with sound start looking for composer / voice over / musician)

March / April

Treasure hunt continues

Experiment continues

(In case I want to work with sound, deadline for finding someone with affinity for the project to help me)

May / June

Finalizing project



VII. Who can help me?

An objective eye

Since this is a personal project, I wouldn't want for it to become inaccessible to others.

My tutors will be of help with this.

An eye (or more eyes) that I can have a dialogue with

About the personal archive: researching different perspectives.

About being bi-cultural, conversations about being and feeling. (Confirming that what I'm doing is relatable and not too personal)

An eye with an ear for sound

I think it would be interesting to work with sound, as the footage doesn't have any. As stated in the timetable I'll be experimenting with this.

VIII. References

Mahmoodian, Z. 2019. *Zanjir*. RRB Photobooks.

Intertwining historical photographs with images of her family and friends, layering them over a conversation reflecting on those experiences, Mahmoodian creates a complexly poetic narrative: She shares her personal story through that of others, intermingling those who lived in the past and those who live in the present. In this way, the act of revisiting the past is a way to understand her own fractured identity, living between cultures and countries.

Calle, S. (2012) *Rachel, Monique (...)* Editions Xavier Barral

Calle selected short excerpts of her mother's diary, the way she selected these tell us something about not only her mother but the way in which Calle saw her mother, how she remembers her.

My Mexican Bretzel (2019) Directed by Nuria Giménez

Film, 16 mm material Gimenez's grandfather shot, a fictional diary as a narrative.

Giménez on using the diary-form as a narrative: a diary is about reconstructing our memories, our identity, and our life. We do the same with film when we edit or when we tell a story. It's never going to be what it was.

Cardiff, J. and Bures Miller, G. (2004) *Road Trip* [Documentation of installation]

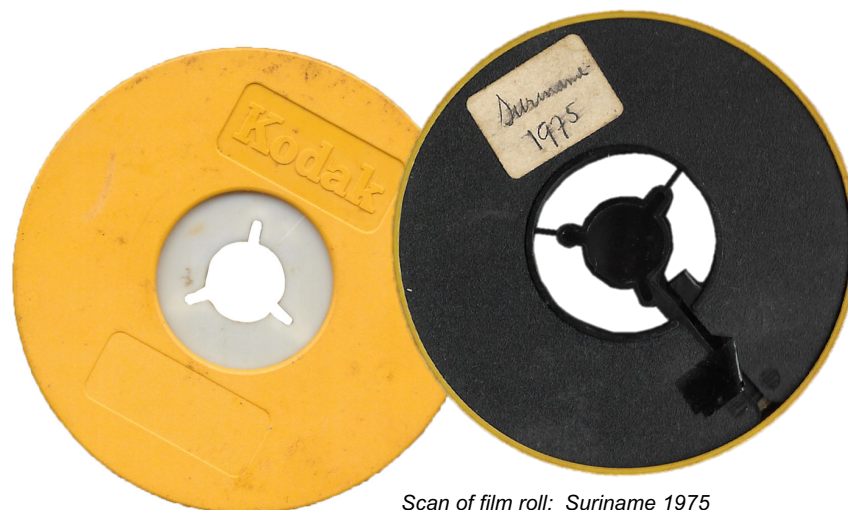
Documentation of two artists talking about 86 slides that are presented through a slide projector on a standing screen: trying to discover the mystery behind the images that Miller's grandfather took of mostly empty landscapes during a drive from Vancouver to NYC 1950's.

Blokland, S. (2007 – ongoing) *Reproduction of family series* [Multimedia]

Ongoing narrative about photography, family histories and migration. Text / Video / Photographic images by and from the Blokland family. Installation examining the role of photography as a renegotiation and a conceptualization of their identity and heritage.

Gario, Q. (2020) *exhibition title: Identities* [multimedia set-ups] Wereld Museum, Rotterdam

Combining museum objects with personal family footage and objects, discussing violent colonial relations and how and by whom knowledge is passed on.



Scan of film roll: Suriname 1975